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CIA Seeks to Curb Reporting of Secrets

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WASHINGTON – Central Intelligence Agency Director William Casey is campaigning to limit news reporting of intelligence affairs at a time when he also is pushing to expand U.S. covert operations.

U.S. officials and intelligence specialists say Mr. Casey is trying to capitalize on a public mood that has turned favorable toward the CIA as fears of terrorism have grown.

The effort to stop the news media from disclosing intelligence secrets has already shown one success. This week the Washington Post, responding to administration pressure that included a telephone call from President Reagan, decided not to print technical information about electronic eavesdropping equipment. The Post deleted the information from an article about the damage allegedly caused by Ronald W. Pelton, former National Security Agency employee, on trial for selling intelligence secrets to the Soviet Union.

Action Against NBC?

The administration already is considering prosecuting National Broadcasting Co. for revelations it made about what Mr. Pelton allegedly sold the Soviets. In addition, Mr. Casey recently has threatened to prosecute several major news organizations for releasing data on intercepts of Libyan diplomatic communication.

Some analysts believe the CIA's campaign may reflect embarrassment over the spy scandals as much as concern over news leaks. "It isn't just a question of leaks," says Stephen Hess, a press analyst at the Brookings Institution. "It has been the year of spy trials. It looks as though everybody is selling everything."

Although the spy cases have received the most publicity, the administration also has taken a tough stance against government officials suspected of leaking national security information to the news media. The administration recently fired a State Department speechwriter and a Pentagon official who allegedly leaked information. Late last year a former Pentagon official was convicted of leaking classified satellite photos of a Soviet ship to a British military publication.

"There has been an attitudinal shift" about intelligence leaks, says George A. Carver, a former CIA official who is a senior fellow at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies. "People before thought that if you were quiet the problem would just go away. Now more and more officials see that won't happen. They are realizing serious damage has been done and that must be addressed."

'Leakiest Administration'

Some officials welcome the administration's increased efforts to silence the leakers and intimidate their media consumers as a belated response to bring under control what Mr. Hess of the Brookings Institution calls history's "leakiest administration." But some fear that public emotion is being exploited to limit freedom of the press to an extent that far exceeds national security concerns.

"Mr. Casey has a terrific climate now," says Howard Simons, former managing editor of the Washington Post and now director of the Nieman Foundation for Journalists at Harvard University. "Terrorism has everyone spooked. Given that climate he can terrorize the press. He himself has become a media terrorist."

U.S. officials have told Washington Post editors that the fight against terrorism is in fact a new type of warfare and that journalists might help the enemy by disclosing certain types of intelligence information. The Post has drawn administration ire for its revelations of U.S. intelligence about Libya as well as the Pelton case, even though some of the information in the case was disclosed 11 years ago in the New York Times.

In any decision whether to bend to official requests not to print information, newspapers have to weigh national security interests, legal considerations and, at a time when many question journalistic motives, the impact on their public image. Mr. Casey has made editors worry about all three.

Being Cautious

Referring to the Pelton story, Washington Post managing editor Leonard Downie explains that "a series of people with very good knowledge about this . . . gave us reasons not to print that part of the story that identified the technology involved that would be injurious to national security. As laymen, we don't necessarily agree, but without more knowledge we can't be sure they are wrong. To be cautious, we at this time aren't publishing that particular information."

The government's campaign against the news media worries some in Congress. Rep. Don Edwards (D., Calif.), chairman of the House Judiciary subcommittee that oversees U.S. counterintelligence operations, says, "The escalation of assaults on the press seem to be paving the way" for an increase in covert activity that Mr. Casey and Secretary of State George Shultz have signaled in recent speeches.

Although the administration has threatened to take news organizations to court, Rep. Edwards charges that Mr. Casey is less interested in real prosecution than in scaring the media away from intelligence revelations as the U.S. prepares to increase its covert operations.

Mr. Hess agrees. "When you talk about prosecuting five major organizations, you aren't talking about serious prosecution," he says, noting that the Justice Department isn't enthusiastic about the prospect of engaging powerful media organizations in a costly and complex court battle.

Nevertheless, newspaper executives don't think this is a good time to take press cases before the Supreme Court. "They (Supreme court judges) have a very erratic record of sometimes favoring the First Amendment and sometimes not," says Mr. Simons.

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